

# Social Crimes

Camilla Nelson

Doctor of Creative Arts, 2006

## Certificate of Originality and Authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. D. Nelson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Signature of Candidate

## Abstract

"Social Crimes" is a thesis comprised of a novel entitled "Crooked" and a critical exegesis on the subject of the social novel entitled "Social Crimes: The Social Novel as Crime Fiction". In the exegesis I argue that the dream of the social novel is primarily a political rather than an aesthetic one, and that, in this sense, social novels must not only address the social in their content and form, but must in some sense be enfranchised as social objects, and circulate as such. I also argue that as avant garde literature has progressively abandoned plot and other forms and conventions commonly associated with popular fiction, mass market, genre, and especially crime fiction, have increasingly come to fill the space once occupied by the social novel, as a genuinely popular form of fiction able to explicate the social transformations and upheavals of contemporary life.

In so arguing, the exegesis draws together a range of critical debates taking place inside and outside the academy, including debates over experimental versus conventional narrative, high versus low art, theory versus practice, and most significantly, perhaps, the political relevance of an increasingly marginalised and marginalising literature in consumer capitalist society.

The novel itself is about organised crime and political corruption in Sydney during the Askin era. It is a hybrid of crime novel, social novel and historical novel — high and low art. In style, content and form it reflects the theoretical concerns mapped out in the exegesis.

## Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor John Dale, without whose critical insight, intelligence, dedication and uncanny editorial ability this project would never have seen the light of day. I would also like to thank my associate supervisor Catherine Cole for the valuable contribution she made to the development of both the critical exegesis and the creative work. Last but not least, thanks go to Meg Simons, Peter Bishop and the Varuna Writer's Centre where the novel went through its gestation.

The help of others during my research for the project has been invaluable. I would like to thank everybody at the Mitchell Library, the State Archives, the Australian Archives, the State Coroner's Office, and those people who dealt with my persistent (though not always successful) requests for documents from the State Attorney General's Office and N.S.W. Police Department. I would like to thank my uncle, former Royal Commissioner Frank Costigan, for giving me the benefit of his insight and experience, as well as a number of people from 'shadier walks of life' who agreed to be interviewed for the project, but have asked to remain anonymous. That said, all errors of fact are intentional and entirely the fault of the author.

# Contents

Introduction	6
You Can't Write a Social Novel After September 11	14
The Crime Novel is Where the Social Novel Went	49
Some Examples of Crime Fiction	
Thomas Harris's <i>Red Dragon</i>	83
James Ellroy's <i>LA Confidential</i>	103
Chris Nyst's <i>Crook as Rookwood</i>	118
Reflections on Writing <i>Crooked</i>	130
Conclusion	136
Manuscript of <i>Crooked</i>	139
Bibliography	429